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ABSTRACT

An interesting approach to the topic of women and literature is to see if the real working roles of women have been reflected in fiction. As delineated in novels, women are seen engaged in: (1) farm labor; (2) jobs that are extensions of their nurturing roles; (3) factory work--especially in the early textile and clothing mills; and (4) housework (though women are rarely protagonists if only "homemakers"). There are realistic portrayals of women as farmers (either with husbands or alone) in Cather's "My Antonia" and Glasgow's "Barren Ground," or as social reformers in Peattie's "The Precipice" and Laughlin's "Just Folks." Portraits of women working in industrialized settings are delineated in Sinclair's "The Jungle" and Dreiser's "Sister Carrie." Representations of women as artists who are paid for their work and do it as professionals are scarce, but one example is Arnow's "The Dollmaker." Women in business are found only in a series of popular novels by Edna Ferber. All these novels provide examples of women characters who are self-aware and even independent, who fail or succeed for the same reasons men do, such as actions of others, narrow societal roles, limitation by circumstances (such as poverty, health, or ignorance), or lack of energy. Such a literature course has appeal and impact, and helps to expose stereotypes for what they are and to present alternatives. Over 45 works of fiction are cited in the concluding bibliography. (NKA)

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WOMEN WORKING: IMAGES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Over the past few years, I have been interested in developing a course on women and literature and have sought a way to focus such a course. What I've devised may be an interesting approach for other instructors as it is an orientation that reveals the ingenuity and strength of women over the years as well as the hardships and injustices they've experienced. This approach also helps to develop an understanding of the work women have done, thus paralleling much of the non-fiction recently published on women and work.

I decided to approach the topic of women and literature via the theme "Women Working: Images in American Literature." I was interested to see, by way of my initial research, whether the historically recorded real working roles of women were reflected in fiction. We know that many women have been farmers, teachers, nurses, doctors, secretaries, clerks, domestics, factory workers, social workers, artists, etc. That is documented. But, does American literature reflect this reality? Are the images in fiction fairly accurate according to what the historical and sociological studies about women and work tell us? Are fictional portrayals accurate in reflecting what we know via reflections in diaries and letters written by women? Have there been novels with working women as protagonists? (And, if so, why hadn't I read many?) These were questions I considered as I read, gathering material for the course. Perhaps, I thought, this emphasis might help students better understand the myths and realities of women as well as our changing attitudes toward women.

What did I find after reading many American novels by and about women and studying the work female protagonists do? A number of observations and conclusions follow. The major roles women have performed in fiction are 1) farm work (overwhelmingly that), 2) jobs that are extensions of their nurturing roles, 3) factory work--especially in the early textile and clothing mills, and 4) housework (though the women are rarely protagonists if "only homemakers"). Let us look at some of the literary examples of these roles.

In fiction, women farm with husbands (for example in Cather's *My Antonia*, Kelley's *Weeds*, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Walker's *Jubilee*), but also alone (in Cather's *O Pioneers!* and Glasgow's *Barren Ground*) and usually *successfully* when alone. There's a strong sense of the "earth mother" about the women farmer, especially the single woman farmer. She's enriched by her relationship with the land and enriches it in return. She often has vision, imagination, and the daring to try new techniques (silos, for example) which others around her first ridicule, then later admire. But in novels involving farm couples, no matter how hard they work, they do often fail, the women worn out--as is the soil. They are ground down by poverty, erratic/undependable weather, market prices, and pregnancy. Edith Kelley's *Weeds* is an excellent example of this. Kelley, a friend of both Sinclair Lewis and Upton Sinclair, was a naturalistic writer, who in this novel gives us great detail of the hard life of a young Kentucky farm girl, Judy Blackford. Judy's a

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vivacious healthy young girl at the beginning, but she marries a young neighbor, and soon grows worn as all the other women are with hard work, poor food, constant pregnancies, and a growing sense of futility over their increasing and hopeless poverty. Only rarely is her sense of beauty and joy renewed--by scenes in the natural world: spring flowers, a lovely vista in the Kentucky hills, young animals, etc. Her life is as limited as it has been for generations of hill tenant farmers. When rarely she can escape the ramshackle house, dirty clothes and dishes, and sickly babies, she finds relief outdoors. There is a deep bond between these farm women and the land. Even though it may not reward them, they work, nurse, and trust it. It's a major, basic factor of their lives.

It is not difficult to find examples of women working on the land for women have always, it seems, been considered natural nurturers. That has also been the basic function of women in so many paid work roles which are actually just extensions of their domestic nurturing roles. American fiction accurately portrays the reality here--the most common work-place jobs women entered were teaching, working in boarding houses, and other domestic jobs such as cooking, being maids, companions, or seamstresses.

By the 1820's and 1830's, women were very active as teachers for a number of interesting reasons: required public education necessitated many more teachers, women were less expensive to hire, and constituted a large pool of appropriate workers ("naturals for this noble work"). But there seem to be very few novels that describe this experience. To be sure, many women taught for only a few years before marriage (as in the *Little House* series)--and the sterotype has been that if they stayed on, they were maladjusted and frustrated as Kate Swift is in Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). Others like Sara Smolinsky in Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925), struggle against poverty, prejudice (she's daughter of an immigrant Jewish rabbi), and family opposition to get a higher education and become professional teachers. That book and May Sarton's *The Small Room* (1961) are the strongest pictures of teachers I found. Louisa May Alcott also describes teaching in *Work* (1873), but her heroine Christy is not well educated, so works as a governess, which is being more a poor-relation-domestic servant-babysitter than a teacher. (She also has to fend off the attentions of males in the house). Christy goes on to try nearly all the genteel female employment available in her time (Civil War): seamstress, domestic, piece worker, nurse, reformer. Thus Alcott shows how the mid-nineteenth century woman was limited to the domestic sphere and/or menial, underpaid jobs.

Social reform became very popular volunteer and professional work for women when Jane Addams became famous for her settlement house and social work in Chicago's immigrant districts. There are a number of heroines in American fiction modeled on her--many of them, too, working in Chicago. *The Precipice* by Ella Peattie (1914) and "*Just Folks*" by Clara Laughlin (1910) are about young, educated women who work with serious commitment as professional social workers.

Nursing, another nurturing role, certainly has involved many women at home and then professionally, especially after the Civil War when training schools were established. But very few novels involve them as protagonists (above the level of Sue Barton and Cherry Ames). Nurses do exist, in American fiction but they are often important for reasons other than their training (in *A Farewell to Arms* by Hemingway, for example). Big Nurse in Kasey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is one exception. Likewise, there are very few novels involving women as doctors: two ex-

amples are the late nineteenth century novels by Sarah O. Jewett - *A Country Doctor* (1884) and Elizabeth S. Phelps' *Dr. Zay* (1882). (This is interesting, because until medicine was "professionalized" i.e. a stipulated formal education required, most "doctors" were women. But as medical schools did not admit women, they couldn't get the necessary education or be licensed, and thus males took over).

Housework, the ubiquitous job of nearly every woman, must not be the stuff of heroines for very few novels I've found show that as the protagonists' only "job." However, housework may be the undercurrent of more interesting work; it may also be one's employment--as a domestic servant. Being a domestic is shown as degrading experience; the servant's every hour belonged to the mistress. The servant lost her personal freedom; she had no place in the house to invite friends, and often had to share a bad and unheated room (with poor furniture and no toilet) with another servant. She wasn't part of the family, yet was supposed to be very loyal to them, and was virtually their "slave." Fictional accounts of domestic work present these circumstances very clearly and echo sociological studies; thus they seem very accurate. The best example I found is *Lummox* by Fannie Hurst, but *Work*--Alcott, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*--Stowe, *Ethan Frome*--Wharton, *Native Son*--Wright, *Maud Martha*--Brooks and *The Street*--Petry all show the degrading nature and experiences of domestic service.

Farmer, teacher, nurse, servant, social reformer--what else do we know women have done? They've been prostitutes, artists, factory workers, independent business women, secretaries, and clerks--and we do have examples of novels showing these, especially women as factory workers--most often in the textile mills. This is historically accurate, for textile manufacturing offered the first major industrial jobs for women, beginning around 1830 in New England. The Lowell, Massachusetts mills and many others catered to young single women, offering them good boarding houses where they were supervised, met other women their age, had cultural advantages rural life couldn't offer, and thus a better situation than being hired hands for neighbors or relatives, which is what they'd previously done before marriage. These young women gained independence and also wages to contribute to their families. They wrote of their own experience (in the *Lowell Offering*), but most of the novels about women in textile mills center around those working later in southern mills. These women leave their eroded mountain farms in Kentucky, the Carolinas, and Virginia to better their lives by working for someone else--and a wage. Soon they are wage slaves, in debt to the factory for housing and food, their health gone, and no recourse. Several interesting novels (*Call Home the Heart*--Burke [1932], *To Make My Bread*--Lumpkin [1964], *The Silent Partner*--Phelps [1871], and *Emmaline*--Rosner, for example) involve women who risk their jobs, families, and even their lives to help organize unions and break factory management's dictatorial control. Their work and the conditions surrounding it lead them into social reform. (Bullard's *Comrade Yetta* is another example involving the New York garment industry, union organization and strikes).

The more famous examples of women working in industrialized settings are Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1905) and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900). In *The Jungle*, the women drudge away in dark, wet, threatening cellars packing tainted meat products, the most awful job imaginable, and in *Sister Carrie*, Carrie labors for a while in a shoe factory, doing backbreaking piecework. Both working situations are very sympathetically described.

Women as artists? I've found a few examples--only three so far

involving women as protagonists who are paid for their work and do it as professionals. One (Thea in *Song of the Lark* by Willa Cather) is a singer who studies for years to develop her talent and move from a tiny Colorado town to Chicago, then finally to international work and fame. Two others are actresses, who seem to just "fall into" their careers. Both Carrie (*Sister Carrie* by Dreiser) and Olivia (in *Women of Genius* by Austin, 1912) seem to be simply vehicles--they're never heart and soul involved in acting, nor does it seem a satisfying, long-term artistic experience. However, there is a fine picture of a woman artist in Harriet Arnow's novel, *The Dollmaker* (1954). Gertie Nevels is a hillbilly mother of five who moves to Detroit to be with her husband who has a defense plant job during World War II. They move from farming (which she loves) and close family to the unfamiliar, dirty, impersonal city. Through months of horrible experiences there, Gertie holds on to her sanity by creating beauty with her carving of man's (Jesus'?) head out of a lovely block of wood from home, and toys and crucifixes for friends. In fact, after her husband loses his job due to strike involvement, she supports the family with her carvings. Her artistry, something her husband has considered foolish, now assumes significance to him, seeing that others will buy and appreciate her work. Women have of course also been authors, but I've found only one novel involving that (*Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaid Singing* by May Sarton), otherwise "only" the creations of women authors.

Though many women have worked as office or store employees, there seem to be very few novels about them until the more socially conscious 1930's. Sinclair Lewis' *The Job* (1936) is about a secretary who became a successful real estate sales-manager, and *A Time to Remember* (also 1936) by Leane Zugsmith realistically relates the work experience of department store employees--who eventually form a union and strike, a long hungry ordeal. *The Homemaker* (Dorothy Canfield, 1924) is a more romantic picture of a woman's meteoric rise from perfectionist-but-discontented-housewife to accomplished retail salesperson in a department store (while her disabled husband happily takes over the work at home).

There are very rare pictures of women in business. Edna Ferber's Emma McChesney series was very popular and, though not great literature, these novels present a sympathetic picture of a capable, attractive woman in garment design, manufacture, and sales.

So, does nineteenth and early twentieth century American literature portray the actuality of women's work? Only moderately well. Some areas such as farming are well represented, others not. Women are rarely portrayed doing many of the jobs we know they've done extensively.

It appears that very few male authors have a working woman as a protagonist (Lewis and Dreiser are two exceptions). I'd hoped to use novels by both men and women in my class, but that is not what developed.

The novels I did find were frequently difficult to track down. They were often highly regarded--and/or very popular when first published, but many have been forgotten long ago and are now out of print. Yet many were very well written with strong insights on American life. Why have, for example, Dreiser's novels survived and Kelley's, Arnow's, or Yezierska's not? Is that a comment on our attitudes toward woman as artists? Have we considered them less serious? less significant? It is a disturbing and serious question.

Beware--if you embark on a course of reading on this topic, it will

be depressing. The women work hard to provide for themselves and others, trying to do so in ways society sanctions. Even though these characters can't always verbalize this reaction, they often feel stymied by their gender and/or environment. What society approves of as work appropriate for them doesn't satisfy them (and pays little). Whether they're in the paid work force or working at home, they hope that their work will be fulfilling, in fact, they trust that it will be. But it rarely is, and a sense of betrayal and conflict/guilt sets in. What the protagonist may have set as an unusual goal, once achieved, is often empty,--or at least not enough. Sara (in *Breadgivers*) is not content even after her great self-sacrifice and struggle to become a teacher; Alexandra (*O Pioneers*) feels unfulfilled as a successful farmer. What is lacking? What do these working women express a need for? If they are mothers working at home, they yearn for space and time alone, variety and personal challenge. For almost all, there's a need for a sense of fulfillment through a sympathetic relationship with another person or sometimes a close group that understands and shares a similar sense of what is important. They discover that individual achievement is important, but so too are meaningful human relationships. We all probably feel that way--and interestingly, in these novels, it's the women who say so.

CONCLUSION

After teaching this course for two years, I can vouch for its appeal and impact. It is so important to expose stereotypes for what they are and to present alternatives. Reading this material, one soon becomes very conscious of the importance of women's work - how many kinds of work we have done and how much a part of the economy we have been for so long. Most women have always worked - a surprising realization for many. Our myth of how women lived, at home and supported by their husbands was true of the very few who could afford that luxury. Not all women have been just wives, mothers, on a pedestal, "old maids," wierd educated types, or idly rich ladies dictating to servants, as much literature would have us believe. This material provides strong examples of women characters who are self-aware and even independent, who fail or succeed for the same reasons men do: actions of others, narrow societal roles, limitation by circumstances (such as poverty, health, ignorance), or lack of energy. It is important to see characters who take responsibility for their own acts *and* to know that both women and men were writing about such people over a hundred years ago.

In such a course, there is still plenty of room for personal experience comparison, for oral history-gathering which enlarges the students' experience (I had them interview mothers and grandmothers about their work), good literary study, and the growing wealth of historical material which can be well used in such a course. Having a job because you want to or because you need to - neither is new. In some periods women may have combined the roles of mother and paid worker more than at other times, but it helps to know that women have always worked. One learns great respect for the achievements of our forebears, feels sorrow for their unhappiness, and gains perspective on our own lives.

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